

# COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

May 27, 2004

## SEA RANCH BLUFF TOP TRAIL REPAIR FEASIBILITY STUDY

File No. 04-021

Project Manager: Jeff Melby

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$40,000 to Sonoma County to conduct a geotechnical investigation and engineering feasibility study in the vicinity of an eroded portion of the Bluff Top Trail Public Access Easement, seaward of Lots 23-25 at The Sea Ranch, and to conduct appraisals of easements and other studies on other sections of the Bluff Top Trail that may be susceptible to collapse.

**LOCATION:** The Sea Ranch, Sonoma County (Exhibit 1)

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Public Access

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### **EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: Location and Site Maps

Exhibit 2: Letters of Support

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### **RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31000 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of up to \$40,000 to Sonoma County to conduct a geotechnical investigation and engineering feasibility study in the vicinity of an eroded portion of the Bluff Top Trail Public Access Easement, seaward of Lots 23-25 at The Sea Ranch, Sonoma County, and to conduct appraisals of easements and other studies on other sections of the Bluff Top Trail that may be susceptible to collapse, subject to the condition that no funds shall be disbursed until Sonoma County has submitted for the written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy evidence that all necessary permits and approvals have been obtained; a final work plan, including budget and schedule; and the names and qualifications of any contractors to be employed to carry out this project.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the public access purposes and criteria set forth in Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 31400 *et seq.*
  2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
  3. The proposed project will serve greater than local needs.”
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### PROJECT SUMMARY:

In the summer of 2003, a section of the Bluff Top public trail at The Sea Ranch in Sonoma County collapsed and was closed by Sonoma County for public safety. The trail closure blocks the public’s only access to one of the most scenic beaches in the area, Walk On Beach. The Conservancy transferred ownership of The Sea Ranch Access Trails, including the Bluff Top Trail, to Sonoma County in 1982. The County estimates that the public access easements at The Sea Ranch are used by 154,000 visitors annually, including Sea Ranch residents, guests, and the general public.

Staff recommends the disbursement of up to \$40,000 to Sonoma County to conduct a geotechnical investigation and engineering feasibility study in the vicinity of an eroded portion of the Bluff Top Trail Public Access Easement seaward of Lots 23-25. This project will provide geotechnical data that will be used to assess the feasibility of implementing an engineered remedy (*e.g.*, constructing a new bridge or stairway) for the eroded portion of the easement. In addition, a portion of the allotted funds will be used to conduct appraisals of easements and other studies on other sections of the Bluff Top Trail that may be susceptible to collapse.

**Site Description:** The Bluff Top Trail is located on the edge of an approximately 25-foot high bluff seaward of The Sea Ranch housing development (see page 2 of Exhibit 1). The Sea Ranch property is a planned community covering more than 10 miles of the Sonoma County coast which was formerly used as a sheep ranch. The ocean bluff is eroding significantly in several areas. The public access trailhead and parking lot for the Walk On Beach Trail is located on Highway 1. The Walk On Beach Trail intersects with the Bluff Top Trail at the ocean bluff. The Bluff Top Trail is closed to the public southeast of this intersection for safety due to the collapse of the trail southeastward of the trail intersection. The closed portion of the Bluff Top Trail blocks the only public access to Walk On Beach. The Bluff Top Trail public access easement is a fixed easement, meaning that it cannot be moved. Residents and guests of The Sea Ranch are allowed to continue to use the portion of the Bluff Top Trail that is currently closed to the public and to access Walk On Beach by walking landward around the collapsed public access easement on The Sea Ranch commons property immediately adjacent to the public access easement.

**Project History:** Section 30610.6 of the Public Resources Code (also known as the Bane Bill) provided for the conveyance of specified public access easements at The Sea Ranch to the Conservancy under prescribed terms and conditions. In October of 1982, the Conservancy transferred ownership of these easements, including the Bluff Top Trail and the Walk On Beach Trail, to Sonoma County. The Conservancy provided grant funds for the development of the public access easements, including trail work, bridges, and stairs. These improvements were substantially completed by 1987. In the summer of 2003, due to catastrophic erosion, the public trail to Walk On Beach at The Sea Ranch was closed to the public seaward of Lots 23-25.

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

|                           |                 |
|---------------------------|-----------------|
| Coastal Conservancy       | \$40,000        |
| Sonoma County             | <u>10,000</u>   |
| <b>Total Project Cost</b> | <b>\$50,000</b> |

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds is the Coastal Access Account. The Coastal Access account is to be used for coastal access projects, and may be used for operation and maintenance expenses, such as the proposed project studies to obtain information necessary to restore and maintain the public access trail.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

This project is consistent with Public Resources Code Sections 31400 and 31400.1. Section 31400 states that “. . . the Coastal Conservancy [shall] have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. . . .” By helping Sonoma County to develop an engineered remedy to the loss of public access, the Conservancy is fulfilling this responsibility. According to § 31400.1, the Conservancy may award grants to any public agency “. . . to develop, operate, or manage lands for public access purposes to and along the coast.” The Conservancy's grant to Sonoma County will help restore public access.

The proposed project is consistent with the Sonoma County Local Coastal Program as described in the Consistency with Local Coastal Program Policies below.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S  
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective B**, the proposed project will increase public access opportunities by obtaining information necessary to reopen a beach to public use that has been inaccessible since the summer of 2003.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S  
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

**Required Criteria**

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the “Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation” section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See “Project Financing” section above.
3. **Support of the public:** See letters of support in Exhibit 2.
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of Sonoma County.
5. **Need:** The geotechnical investigation and engineering feasibility study are needed to design an engineered remedy (*e.g.*, bridge) to restore public access where the Bluff Top Trail has collapsed.

6. **Greater-than-local interest:** Sonoma County estimates that the public access easements at The Sea Ranch are used by 154,000 visitors annually, including Sea Ranch residents, guests, and the general public.

**Additional Criteria**

7. **Urgency:** Action is needed to restore the public's access to Walk On Beach.
12. **Readiness:** Sonoma County is ready to start and finish the project on a timely basis.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See the "Project History" section above.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:**

This project is consistent with Section V (Recreation) of the Sonoma County Local Coastal Plan. Section V (page V-1) includes Coastal Act Policies 30210, 30211, and 30212 which address public access. Under Development and Operation of Accessways (page V-8), it states that public accessways must be maintained to protect public safety. This project is consistent with these policies in that the necessary studies will be used to increase the public's ability to safely reach the beach.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

This project is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15306 regarding information collection. Upon approval by the Conservancy, staff will file a Notice of Exemption.